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ON CREATING A USEFUL AND PLEASING STATE DEFENSE FORCE WEBSITE

Sergeant First Class Finn Rye, ASDF

Some State Defense Force (SDF) brigades still do not have web sites, while others that do are poorly maintained. It would behoove all SDF brigades to keep their web pages relatively professional in appearance and up-to-date. Professional looking web sites would improve public perception in addition to avoiding the appearance of “warrior wannabees,” as described in a 2003 USA Today article.

There are a few SDF brigade websites that stand out above the rest, including California, Maryland, Indiana, Alaska and, one of the best, Georgia, which not only has a great looking web site, but posts excellent material.^b This opinion is based on the fact that those SDF websites on the aforementioned top five (5) list meet several critical criteria that includes modern appearance, current content, ease of use and creativity. Many SDF brigades trying to maintain a website may not have the in-house expertise or resources to facilitate the nature of a professional web page; however; if a SDF brigade is planning to start a website or is presently maintaining a site, here is some information that should prove to be helpful.

The first recommended course of action for any website administrator would be to regularly evaluate the unit’s current needs for the website.

- To make the website an information repository for the unit’s personnel, consider the following:
 - Identify forms and other documents that the unit’s personnel need access to on a regular basis.
 - Obtain permission to post any documents as they could be considered confidential and determine that the forms are always the latest revision.
 - Post an accurate calendar of training and drill dates for use by the troops and training officers.
- To make the website a public relations tool, consider the following:
 - Work with the Public Information Officer to decide what types of information are important for the general public.
 - Identify and make contact with the various local, municipal and organizational print media to determine what they are interested in seeing and to routinely send informational notices.

^b The Alaska State Defense Force website is located at <http://www.ak-prepared.com/asdf/> . Other website addresses can be obtained through a simple “Google” search.

- Establish links with all local retired military, medical, legal and law enforcement groups; however, avoid similar contact with any militant “militia” or rump “SDF wannabees.”
- Designate a Public Information Office staff member to respond promptly to inquiries to ensure that the website is responsive to the public.
- To make the website a recruiting tool, consider the following:
 - Provide an accurate and easy to find recruiting section, including appropriate forms.
 - Provide clear and easy to follow instructions for a potential recruit to follow in order to submit an application.
 - Indicate an appropriate and current recruiter for both officers and enlisted personnel, with both an E-mail address and a telephone number.
 - Ensure that a response is auto-generated to inform the sender that the inquiry has been received and is being processed.
 - Designate a recruiting staff member to respond promptly to inquiries.

Web pages should be continually updated with news, articles, photos, and current forms.” If the content is not continuously kept up-to-date then the site will inevitably become an unused relic of the past.

- To make the website pleasing to the eye and organized in such a way as to make it easy for the visitor to find information consider the following:
 - Maintain a common design theme, font size and font/color selection.
 - Ensure that the text contrasts with the background; for instance, a light colored text with a light colored background will make it difficult to read.
 - Use a plain, non-elaborate page background to eliminate clutter and confusion.
 - Strike a good balance when applying graphics to the website; graphics that are too large add additional wait times and bandwidth usage to the visitors browsing experience, graphics that are too small or of low quality create a poor overall effect.
 - There are many different varieties of software for creating a website over a wide spectrum of cost, selection is a matter of personal preference coupled with a concern for cost; many “Web Masters” prefer Microsoft Frontpage, while there is a major push in the website design industry to use Adobe Dreamweaver.

With regard to Web Master assignments, it is best to appoint at least two people who can make changes to the website content. That way the website is not dependant on a sole person in case

of an emergency, a separation or just general workload issues. If the unit does not currently have a second person with the technical skills to act as a backup, assign a person to be trained. Typically, it is not difficult to train someone in the basics of content revision on the average website. In practice it is a good idea to have a website committee that meets to discuss any proposed changes; however, this is not always feasible.

Several years ago the Alaska State Defense Force (ASDF) underwent a major web site revision. Due to considerable time and energy expended by a dedicated website staff and ongoing assistance from the State of Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, who supplies the web hosting space, the new and improved ASDF website can be considered on the top five list.^c Nevertheless, it is challenging to maintain the site due to time constraints and lack of feedback.

Perhaps the most critical and immensely important first step is to get the support and buy-in from the organization's leadership when creating or making significant changes to a Brigade website. A recommendation with regard to this need is to request regular input and feedback from Headquarters staff and unit commanders, through the Office of the Chief of Staff, in the form of news bites, articles and occasional meaningful pictures (in a .jpg file). This keeps everyone engaged and cultivates a sense of ownership in the website. Just remember, make your web site a tool that serves your SDF goals.^d

^c The author is the ASDF Web Master.

^d The author invites inquiries and requests for guidance on constructing a website through the following E-mail address "SFC Finn Rye, ASDF" <finnrve@gmail.com> .